

VOICES FROM THE FACTORY FLOOR/ LLEISIAU O LAWYR Y FFATRI

Holiday worker at Alupac, Blacmill, Bridgend during the summer of 1977

Interviewee: VSW042 Alison Rees

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Interviewer: Susan Roberts on behalf of Women's Archive of Wales

Alison was born on 25th January 1960 in Ogmores Vale. At the time, her father was a clerk for the colliery and later became an insurance auditor. Her mother worked for an insurance firm, and worked in a shop for a while. She has three older brothers.

She went to Ty Newydd Primary School, and the local grammar school in Ogmores Vale. She loved school. She left when she was eighteen years old and did A levels in English, Geography and Economics. She decided she didn't want to go to University so she looked around for a job and found employment with the library service so stayed with them all her working life.

She had a few temporary jobs during the holidays, working in a shop and in a factory.

The job at the factory was a holiday job. Her sister-in-law had been approached to see if she wanted some temporary work but she turned it down and suggested Alison. Alison agreed that she'd like to do the job. It was only for a period of three to four weeks as they needed people to cover summer holidays. Alison can't remember whether it was when she was seventeen or eighteen, but thinks it was when she was seventeen so it would have been in 1977.

The factory was called Alupac, and was in Blackmill, between Ogmores Vale and Bridgend. The person who'd approached her sister in law was a neighbour who worked there and Alison thinks employees had been asked to look out for people who might want temporary employment. The factory was very busy.

She had to go for an interview but it was fairly informal.

00.04.01: "It was mainly a social affair really, it wasn't anything formal."

There were about four people going for an interview that day, possibly more. They were all female – another girl of Alison's age, and two older women. They told her she could start the

following week. Alison was pleased. The money was quite good for somebody who wasn't earning anything – about £100 a week at the time.

She knew absolutely nothing about the factory beforehand, she didn't even know that it existed. She took the local bus to work. There were two shifts. There was one that started at six o'clock, and another one that started in the afternoon (possibly two o'clock). Shifts were rotated. Her father would pick her up if it was too late for the bus.

She can remember her first day. She can remember being taken around the factory floor and shown the different machines. There was a supervisor to show her exactly what to do. (She thinks she was shown around the day she went for the interview.) There were four or five machines and they put you on the slowest one to start with.

00.08.19: 'It was very unskilled work because there were machine presses stamping out aluminium dishes, and they were blown out of the machine with hot air ... into a basket. Basically all you did was gather the dishes up and pack them into boxes. So it didn't need a lot of training really.'

She felt quite nervous on her first day but she soon overcame this feeling because it wasn't difficult work, and there wasn't an awful lot to learn.

The actual products were aluminium dishes used for Chinese take aways. They also made plastic-lined aluminium dishes for food that corrodes aluminium such as sardines.

On her first day she discovered that her cousin was one of the mechanics who looked after the machines. He was an ex-RAF mechanic who had found employment there after he'd come out of the RAF.

The other workers were all very friendly. She couldn't relate to a lot of them, because a lot of them were considerably older than she was, and from different backgrounds.

00.10.45: 'My father was a white collar worker and had brought us up to believe that education was very important, and that we weren't going to go into factory jobs, and down the mine, and things like that for my brothers... I remember thinking that their aspirations seemed fairly really, compared to mine because I wasn't going to work in a factory all my life. It was just a means to an end, just a holiday job to get some money.'

00.11.20: 'They wanted a job that fitted in with their family life, and gave them some money to help with the family expenses'.

00.11.42: 'I can't say I made any friends there. The one young woman that was working with me, we had a completely different attitude. She would have loved a permanent job there, whereas I didn't want a permanent job, and she was absolutely astounded when I said I didn't want a permanent job there.'

The work was quite repetitive and quite boring. **'It as something you could do without thinking really.'**

It was also very noisy because the machines were stamping out the aluminium. There was no protection provided for the ears. It was too noisy to chat while working. Sometimes the machines would foul and they would be stopped, and then it was possible to have a chat with somebody.

00.14.06: ‘It was quite hard work because the machines were producing the dishes at quite a fast rate so you didn’t have much time to stop and talk. ... You were under pressure. And when you weren’t on the machine gathering the dishes you were making up boxes, or finishing the boxes off, or taking the waste away, tidying up, sweeping up. You were basically doing something all the time.’

There was a morning break, half an hour for lunch and an afternoon break. The conversation would be about husbands, and babies, pop music.

The work was one person to a machine. There was also one person floating who did all the little odd jobs. You stayed on your machine until somebody relieved you or the machine fouled. The mechanic would then come.

00.17.42: ‘You’d go home sometimes at night and you’d lie in bed and you could hear the Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!’

There was no uniform provided. You were told to wear something over your clothes. Alison had a nylon overall that she’d been wearing because she’d been working in a shop.

The job in the factory was physically harder than the part-time jobs that Alison had done beforehand. She would feel tired in the evenings and ready for bed. Alison gave her mother some of her wages for her keep but the rest was spent on records and clothes.

The work was very dusty and Alison got lots of tiny pieces of aluminium in her hair and on her clothes. She was given clothes to wear because there may have been sharp edges on the aluminium but she still got scratches on her arms as she would be wearing short sleeves. Sometimes a dish would blow out and catch her on the arm and if there was a rough piece on it she would get scratched.

00.21.30: ‘I think it was seen as a fairly clean job because you didn’t get filthy, you just got slightly grimy. If you wiped your face at the end of the day it would be grey... There was obviously a lot of aluminium dust in the air.’

Conditions in the factory were generally good because it was a modern factory – the toilets and the rest room were modern and clean. The facilities were good. You could make tea and coffee and warm up food.

It was quite hot there. (The weather was good at the time.)

There were about twenty people working there at the time. It was mainly older women (30+) working there – mainly women who’d had children and the children were in school. Most of the women were very local. They lived within five or ten minutes of the factory. It was quite

a small factory and Alison thinks it has expanded by now and that they have another site as well.

You weren't allowed to leave the factory floor without asking permission. You'd need to ask the supervisor if you wanted to go to the toilet or go for a drink of water.

Workers at the factory tended to go to one of the local clubs. These were informal occasions rather than organized events.

00.28.55: 'It was the sort of place, they recruited by word of mouth rather than advertising for staff. I think probably some people were related, or were friends and even possibly to the men who owned the factory.'

Alison remembers seeing the bosses – two men in ties – about the place. The supervisor would come round and check what was being done.

Alison enjoyed the fact that the work didn't require much thought and was easy to do. She was there for a total of between three to four weeks.

She feels that she learnt that you need to get along with people.

00.32.13: 'You couldn't go in and be a know-it-all. You had to bide your time and watch what you said.'

There was a sort of hierarchy there – and the older women there were senior.

Alison enjoyed her time there, but wouldn't have enjoyed it if she knew that she would have to work there indefinitely.

00.33.13: 'It made me determined I wasn't going to do factory work. I would have fought tooth and nail not to have gone into factory work on a permanent basis.'